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# Benefits of Foreign Language Instruction

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# **Benefits of Foreign Language Instruction**

By

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An Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for Graduation from the  
Western Oregon University Honors Program

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## Abstract

There are many benefits to teaching a foreign language, for example Spanish, to elementary school students in the United States. There are forty five million Hispanics who speak Spanish as a first or second language and there are six million Spanish students and there is an increasing need for United States citizens to be bilingual. Teaching students a second language will also help to increase the influence of the United States politically and economically. This paper will look at how foreign languages are typically taught to students in the United States, and how the English language is taught to students in Europe. It will also explore the cognitive benefits to teaching foreign languages to younger students through research from educational journals and texts concerning bilingual education. The many benefits of teaching elementary school students a foreign language in public schools should persuade school districts to incorporate mandatory foreign language classes.

## **Introduction**

There is no debate over the fact that elementary school students need to learn to read or write, or that they need to learn mathematics and science. However, there is a debate over whether students should be studying foreign languages in elementary schools. Many people have the opinion that spending more time and money on foreign language classes, for young students in the United States, is unnecessary. There are also people who feel that students can get by just as well knowing only English. However, there are many benefits to teaching foreign languages to elementary school students of the United States.

Several states produce programs to teach students foreign languages and to promote bilingualism in those students who already speak a language other than English. Students who cannot speak English are entering classrooms all over the country and the best idea is to simply support bilingualism where it is most natural, in students who need to learn English. It is also necessary that English speaking students be given the opportunity to learn Spanish, or another foreign language because of the cognitive benefits that come with being bilingual (Donato, R. & Terry, R.M., 1995, p. 5).

There are many studies, by the Education for Global Leadership corporation and in the text Foreign Language Learning: The Journey of a Lifetime, that show various skills are increased when a student begins to learn a second language. There are also many studies that prove that younger students have more time to become more fluent, and develop a better accent than adults. These and many other benefits of teaching

elementary school students a foreign language in public schools should persuade school districts to incorporate mandatory foreign language classes.

In addition to the increase in Hispanic students changing the demographics of U.S. schools, there are other important reasons for teaching foreign languages to students at a younger age. There are so many languages other than Spanish that need to be taught to United States citizens, in order to support the influence of the United States politically and economically. Economically, there are business men who only speak English, and it can really influence their counterparts in other countries if they are being communicated to in their own language, without a translator. Politically, the United States needs translators in many languages. After the tragedy of September 11 and in the aftermath, there has been a need for people who can speak Arabic. However, if no one is teaching Arabic, or other much needed languages, the United States will always lack communicators and translators.

Many other countries across the world have installed programs into their elementary schools to help their students learn a second language (Hinkel, Eli, 2005, p. 12). In Europe many children grow up to be bilingual, and sometimes even multilingual because of their schooling. The United States needs to begin to support foreign language programs earlier in schools because students are missing out on the many advantages that could be provided to them.

In an influential book, Terry and Donato (1995) state that foreign languages are best learned through extended study beginning in elementary school and into adulthood. They go on to say that if Americans are going to be truly proficient in world languages

and world cultures they need more than a few foreign language classes in high school and college.

There are many organizations and commissions that recommend children start studying foreign languages early, including: the National Commission on Excellence in Education, the National Advisory Board on International Education programs, the National Association of Elementary School Principals, the American Council on Education Commission on International Education, the National council of State supervisors of Foreign Languages and the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (Donato, R. & Terry, R.M., 1995, p. 4 ). These organizations support beginning early foreign language education in the United States because countries like the United States make language learning optional are found to have low standards of achievement (Donato, R. & Terry, R.M., 1995, p. 28).

In the past twenty years many changes have taken place regarding foreign language education. In 1994, forty states required that schools offer two years of a foreign language to students, ten states include foreign language education in their elementary curriculum, thirty eight states have developed or are developing content standards for foreign language, and eight states are developing content standards for English as a second language (Donato, R. & Terry, R.M., 1995, p. vii). In the year 2000, the “Educate America Act propelled us into the future where foreign language learning finally came of age. This federal initiative to stimulate and support reform throughout each state’s educational system included foreign language as one of the challenging subject matters among the ten cited in which all students in grades 4, 8, 12 should demonstrate competence. As one of the national education goals foreign language

education has taken its place among the important subjects that make up the core curriculum” (Donato, R. & Terry, R.M., 1995, p. vi).

The report by the President’s Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies encourages students to master one foreign language and to learn a second. They are also looking for students to study languages in the early grades, but have determined that there are many factors that can affect foreign language study. A few of these factors include: time devoted to study, class size supportive atmosphere, and well trained teachers (Donato, R. & Terry, R.M., 1995, p.4).

Schools across the United States are having many problems installing successful foreign language programs because of the many factors required to make a program truly successful. There is a serious lack of funding for foreign language programs and schools. There are also a lack of qualified teachers, inadequate program design, a lack of materials, as well as a lack of evaluation procedures (Donato, R. & Terry, R.M., 1995, p.3). In 1988, they found that only one fifth of responding elementary schools reported that they offered some type of foreign language classes. Those classes were: 68% in Spanish, 41% in French, 12% in Latin, 10% in German, 6% in Hebrew, 3% in Chinese, and 2% in Russian (Donato, R. & Terry, R.M., 1995, p.10). In grades 7 through 12, Spanish accounts for nearly 70 percent of all foreign language enrollments (Education for Global Leadership, 2006, p. 10). There is a great importance for Spanish language instruction because of the increase in the Latino population in the United States. However, there is a great need for students to learn languages such as Chinese and Arabic and oftentimes they are not being offered because there are not enough proficient teachers and programs.

Despite pressure from various levels of government, the truth is that there is not enough money, nor enough teachers to support foreign language classes in elementary schools until foreign language instruction becomes a priority for schools across the nation. Since students really benefit in multiple ways with the study of foreign languages, the statistics of how many students in the United States study a foreign language can be shocking. In 2000, only one-third of seventh to twelfth grade students studied a foreign language, less than 50% of high school students were enrolled in a foreign language course, only 5 percent of elementary school students were enrolled in these classes and fewer than one-in-ten college students enrolled in a foreign language class. Also, the majority of students do not take more than one year of foreign language instruction. (Education for Global Leadership, 2006, pg. 10)

There are several studies that support foreign language instruction in elementary classrooms. One such study was called A Ten-Year Chronicle of Student Attitudes Toward Foreign Language in the Elementary School. It is a study performed in an elementary school classroom with a FLES (Foreign Language in Elementary Schools) program. The study examines students who are in the FLES program in elementary school and asks them various questions about their feelings toward learning a foreign language. In this study only Spanish and French are included. The study then goes on to look at the same group of students ten years down the road, to once again see how they felt about foreign language instruction in schools. The study showed that students were definitely more responsive to foreign language instruction ten years later, after they had been enrolled in foreign language classes in elementary school (Heining-Boynton, A.L., & Haitema, T., 2007, p. 1).



In 2001, Turnbull, Lapkin, and Hart studied the achievement scores of over 5000 students in immersion programs in Ontario, Canada. In the third grade, the students in the immersion programs had scores that were comparable to the students in the regular program. By the sixth grade the students in the immersion programs had scores that had far surpassed those in the regular programs (Stewart, J., 2005, p. 11-16). “In schools in many countries, where students have outperformed American students in reading and math, foreign languages are introduced and emphasized at an early age.” (Stewart, J., 2005, p. 11-16).

Europe is well known for its multilingual citizens and many European students start learning English very early in schools. In Europe in the 1960’s they were already developing second language instruction in the primary grades. They started out developing it in the secondary grades, but the more advanced the school, the earlier they were teaching a foreign language (Stern, H.H., 1969, p. 12). “All but two countries (Ireland and Scotland) in the European Union mandate the study of a foreign language, which usually begins in primary school. With the exception of Italy and Wales, all European students must learn a foreign language throughout their compulsory education.” (Education for Global Leadership, 2006, p. 25)

In Europe foreign languages are most often introduced between the ages 8-11 and the most commonly taught language is English (Donato, R. & Terry, R.M., 1995, p. 19-20). Teachers usually teach about two to three hours a week, but oftentimes they have a lack of qualified teachers. Many of their foreign language teachers are not native speakers so it can be difficult for students to pick up proper accents in a foreign language. In Europe the need for communication across linguistic boundaries is

currently so great that they have to teach foreign languages. However, the need to know more foreign languages has also extended to the United States (Donato, R. & Terry, R.M., 1995, p. 20).

Other countries have also begun to install more serious foreign language programs. In Poland, the study of Russian is mandatory, but they teach English and French after school hours. In African and Asian countries they do not always have materials in their own languages so they have to learn a second language in order to use the books and materials available (Stern. H.H., 1969, p. 36). However, there are some developing countries, like Ghana, Zambia, and Kenya, that simply use English to teach their students, but it is difficult for them to find proper teachers and materials (Stern, H.H., 1969, p. 37).

## **Political Advantages**

“Speaking English is no longer enough. Tomorrow’s world belongs to those who are prepared to move beyond the nation’s borders in outlook...and in language.” (Casanova, U. & Arias, B., 1993, p. 2). There is a multitude of evidence that supports early bilingual education because of its political advantages. Some surveys have been done to show that the United States is behind in its foreign language education programs. Students in the United States have been tested and found to be much less knowledgeable about geography and other cultures than students from other countries.

There were surveys conducted by the Asia Society in 2001, and another by the National Geographic Society in 2002, that showed young Americans lack of geographic knowledge. Eighty five percent of young Americans could not locate Iraq or Iran on a map of the Middle East, but the majority of them knew that the island featured in the show “Survivor” was in the South Pacific. Eighty three percent could not locate Afghanistan, thirty seven percent could not find China, fifty six percent could not find India on a map, and twenty five percent of college-bound high school students could not name the ocean between California and Asia. The lack of knowledge about the world and other very influential countries is bound to affect the United States in the future. With foreign language education support students would not only be learning about language, but they would also be learning about geography and culture; something that they desperately need (Education for Global Leadership, 2006, p. 23).

There were two former Secretaries of Education under President Ronald Reagan, Terrel Bell and William Bennett, who promoted foreign language education.

Secretary Bell actually blamed American education for making us into what he called ‘a bunch of monolingual bumpkins’. Secretary Bennett had a model high school known as Madison High School and included two years of foreign language education among the graduation requirements (Casanova, U. & Arias, B., 1993, p. 3).

Bilingual education was actually very popular in the United States in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, mostly because there were so many Germans on the East Coast that they had to teach both German and English. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries there came a serious opposition to foreign languages (Casanova, U. & Arias, B., 1993, p. 7). In the early 1950’s there was a resurgence of interest in foreign language study that was led by Earl J. McGrath, United States Commissioner of Education. This resurgence caused the enrollment in elementary school foreign language programs to increase from 5,000 children in 1941, to a quarter of a million by 1955. From 1952 to 1955 the number of communities offering elementary school foreign language programs quadrupled. In 1960, there was the peak where elementary foreign language programs were established in all 50 states, but during the 1960’s the number of programs decreased dramatically (Donato, R. & Terry, R. M., 1995, p. 2). By 1994, only Louisiana required the teaching of a foreign language in elementary schools (Donato, R. & Terry, R. M., 1995, p. 7).

Another aspect of foreign language education that the United States needs to work on, other than installing more program, is what languages are being taught. Spanish is the most common language studied in the United States and while it is very important because of the high Hispanic population, there are many other languages that are bound to be very important in the future and that also need to be studied. There are

languages known as “critical languages” that are crucial to national security. Some examples include: Arabic, Chinese, Hindi, Japanese, Korean, Persian/Farsi, Russian, and Turkish. Arabic happens to be attracting an increasing number of students but still only accounts for 0.8 percent of foreign language enrollments in American postsecondary institutions (Education for Global Leadership, 2006, p. 10).

Only one percent of college undergraduates study abroad and teacher education requires very few courses on international topics. Altogether, understanding other cultures is going to be vital for Americans in the future. The majority of Americans get their international information from the media. The media also has to put more focus on world events because American ignorance can negatively influence our economy and our national security (Education for Global Leadership, 2006, p. 10).

As far as the economy, large U.S.-based multinationals and small businesses need to market their products around the globe and be able to work effectively with people all across the world. Different firms constantly need employees with knowledge of foreign languages and cultures (Education for Global Leadership, 2006, p. 11). U.S. English is an organization against bilingualism, but still expressed preference for an executive director with bilingual skills (Casanova, U. & Arias, B., 1993, p. 3). “In fact, in one survey of human resource managers, participants reported that proficiency in a foreign language was a consideration in hiring decisions at 42 percent of firms, and 66 percent considered it in making retention decisions.” (Education for Global Leadership, 2006, p. 17).

The majority of growth potential for the United States is in overseas markets. One in five U.S. manufacturing jobs is tied to exports, and in “2004, 58 percent of

growth in the earnings of U.S. businesses came from overseas.” (Education for Global Leadership, 2006, p. 14). American producers have a great chance to be successful overseas with foreign consumers, but the majority of foreign consumers speak a language other than English. The United States is only home to five percent of the world’s population. Trade is shifting across the globe. The United States trade to Asia is close to \$800 billion which is much more than trade with Europe.

United States students are graduating from colleges lacking the skills of their foreign peers. The RAND Corporation surveyed respondents for 16 global corporations and were very critical of the United States universities graduates because of their lack of international skills. “One marketing manager said that, compared to their counterparts from universities in other parts of the world, U.S. students are ‘strong technically’ but ‘shortchanged’ in cross-cultural experience and ‘linguistically deprived.’ Another corporate human resource manager explained: ‘Universities don’t think globally—it’s not ingrained in their philosophy and curriculum to create the global worker.’ One corporate respondent went even further: ‘If I wanted to recruit people who are both technically skilled and culturally aware, I wouldn’t even waste time looking for them on U.S. college campuses.’” (Education for Global Leadership, 2006, p. 15).

In a 2002 survey of large United States corporations they found that close to 30% of companies believed that they had failed to exploit their international business opportunities due to insufficient personnel with international skills. Because they had a lack of culturally competent workers there were consequences that included: missed marketing or business opportunities, failure to recognize important shifts in host country’s policies toward foreign owned corporations, failure to take full advantage of

expertise available or technological advances occurring abroad, and the failure to anticipate the needs of the customers. Approximately 80% of the business leaders expected their business to increase notably if their staff were more internationally competent (Education for Global Leadership, 2006, p. 15).

There have been many embarrassing blunders by American corporations because of this international ignorance. The Microsoft Corporation had to recall 200,000 copies of the Window 95 operating system because it showed Kashmir lying outside the boundaries of India and India banned the software (Education for Global Leadership, 2006, p. 15). There was software distributed in Turkey that contained a map that labeled “Kurdistan”, which is a crime in Turkey. Then there was also a video game released in Arabic countries that had Arabic chanting of the Koran followed by violent scenes in the game. These errors are rarely viewed as mistakes by other countries, but more often are viewed as negligent indifference or international slights by the United States (Education for Global Leadership, 2006, p. 16).

In a 2002 survey about 40% of U.S. companies reported that their international sales were growing more rapidly than their domestic sales. U.S. businesses cannot continue to insist on their own way of doing things if they are going to do business with the rest of the world. In order to be successful abroad, the business leaders of American have to understand the minds and preferences of people and cultures very different from their own. However, American businessmen are lagging behind. The average number of languages spoken by an American business executive is 1.5 and the average number of languages spoken by a business executive from the Netherlands is 3.9. In negotiations

the Americans are at a disadvantage because they have to rely on translators to communicate their messages (Education for Global Leadership, 2006, p. 16).

Richard Wagoner is the President and CEO of General Motors and he stated that learning Portuguese, while on assignment in Brazil, really increased his effectiveness in working with the Brazilian business community. Another business leader, Douglas Daft, worked as the chairman and CEO of Coca-Cola. He said that his three decades living in Asia while working for the company shaped his ability to lead and he considers that understanding and valuing other cultures to be essential for anyone working for Coca-Cola.

Concerning national security, the FBI and other agencies do not have sufficient linguists in the critical languages to translate intelligence information. The language needs are in less-commonly taught languages such as: Arabic, Chinese, Hindi, Japanese, Korean, Persian/Farsi, Russian, and Turkish. More than 80 federal agencies employ individuals with proficiency in more than 100 foreign languages. Our international knowledge needs are critical in poorly understood regions such as: the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Africa, Central Asia, South and Southeast Asia, and China (Education for Global Leadership, 2006, p. 18). In early 2006, President George W. Bush introduced the National Security Language Initiative to increase the number of Americans with advanced proficiency in critical languages. It proposed funding for early language education in elementary schools, expanding the number of foreign language teachers, and putting more money into immersion and study abroad programs (Education for Global Leadership, 2006, p. 11



“In 1998, television interviewer Larry King asked former President Gerald Ford—then 85 years old—what he worried about most for our country. President Ford replied: ‘I worry about the possibility we might drift back into isolationism.’ America must be engaged with the rest of the world: an isolated or insulated America is an America in jeopardy.” (Education for Global Leadership, 2006, p. 11). When the United States was attacked on September 11, 2001 it became tempting for the United States to cut themselves off from the rest of the world, but it cannot happen. This generation has to redefine the ‘educated American’. They need to be conversant in more than one language and know about other cultures and international issues; it has become critical to the lives of Americans (Education for Global Leadership, 2006, p. 11).

## **Cognitive Benefits**

Many countries across the world choose to teach more than one language in their schools because studies show the many benefits of being multilingual. Research shows that foreign language study improves cognitive abilities, positively influences achievement in other disciplines, and results in higher achievement test scores, when study of a second language begins in the elementary school years (Stewart, J., 2005, p. 1). The Foreign Language Study in Elementary Schools: Benefits and Implications for Achievement in Reading and Math has also shown that students who study a foreign language are often more knowledgeable about the world and other cultures. These students have longer to learn a language and this can result in a better pronunciation and accent.

There are definite differences between how a child learns a new language and how an adult learns a new language. However you can look at language learning in sections and children most often have much better pronunciation of words than adults do (Stern, H.H., 1969, p. 61). Therefore it has been determined that the “earlier a child is started the faster he will attain a good pronunciation of the language” (Stern, H.H., 1969, p. 61). Adults have a more advanced vocabulary and grammar than children so it is sometimes difficult to tell whether adults learn vocabulary and grammar faster than children. Even if they do not learn vocabulary or grammar faster than children, what they are learning is usually more complex because of their more advanced background knowledge in their first language (Stern, H.H., 1969, p. 62).

There are many practical considerations for learning a language earlier. The first consideration is that learning a language takes time and the more time the better for an individual. Foster (1987) reported that the number of years of foreign language instruction was directly and positively related to higher levels of cognitive and metacognitive processing (Donato, R. & Terry, R.M., 1995, p. 5). Although there is debate over whether children can learn languages more easily than adults, beginning language learning in elementary school certainly means that children will have more years of language study and can begin acquiring a third language while they are still in school. Greater language proficiency can be achieved with a longer amount of time on task. Research indicates that children who are exposed to foreign languages at a young age achieve higher levels of cognitive development at an earlier age. This is also emphasized by the fact that many other countries begin foreign language education at the elementary school level (Education for Global Leadership, 2006, p. 25).

Learning a foreign language can also help expose students to other cultures. “Research suggests that attitudes about other groups and peoples are formed by the age of ten and are often shaped between the ages of four and eight.” (Education for Global Leadership, 2006, p. 25). Learning a language at a young age helps children accept other cultures because they are open-minded, and knowledge of a foreign language facilitates travel and can enhance job opportunities. Research has suggested that younger children are more open and receptive to learning about other cultures and people than adolescents and adults (Donato, R. & Terry, R.M., 1995, p. 5). Students of foreign languages also develop an understanding of geographical and cultural perspectives that can enhance learning in other classes such as social studies, science,

art and music (Stewart, J., 2005, p. 4). For these reasons it is important that foreign language learning starts in elementary schools (Education for Global Leadership, 2006, p. 25).

Many people have also agreed that learning a second language can assist in learning a third language later on, especially if the languages are similar. Two languages like Spanish and Italian sound similar and have many of the same grammatical rules therefore if a person learns one it would be much easier to pick up the other later on (Stern, H.H., 1969, p. 63).

“The benefits of foreign language study last throughout one’s lifetime. Recent research indicates that knowing two languages may help stave off age-related mental decline. Researchers compared monolingual to bilingual adults in a test of cognitive function, and bilingualism seemed to offer a protective benefit” (Education for Global Leadership, 2006, p. 25).

There are also many other recent studies that prove the benefits of teaching students foreign languages in elementary schools through standardized testing. For example “students who completed at least four years of foreign-language study scored more than 100 points higher on each section of the SAT than students who took a half year or less. In fact, students who studied four or five years of a foreign language scored higher on the verbal section than students who had studied any other subject for the same number of years” (Education for Global Leadership, 2006, p. 25). It has been reported that students in the Fairfax County, Virginia, immersion schools not only scored as well or better than comparison groups on achievement tests, but that they remained high academic achievers for the rest of the academic experience. In Kansas

City, Missouri, an independent public charter school features instruction in French in most subject areas with English language arts beginning in 1<sup>st</sup> grade. The elementary school is open to all children residing in the Kansas City, Missouri, School District. Nearly all the students in the school showed gains in their achievement test scores and surpassed students in comparative school settings where a second language was not studied (Stewart, J., 2005, p. 5).

This is often attributed to the fact that studying a foreign language helps students understand English grammar better and improves their overall communication and problem-solving skills (Education for Global Leadership, 2006, p. 25). “Children who study a foreign language tend to develop new perspectives and depth of understanding about the vocabulary and structure of their first language. When learning a second language, students are constantly exposed to words and patterns that are similar to their first language or from which words in their first language were developed.” (Stewart, J., 2005, p. 4).

In a study referred to as Landry’s study, from 1974, sixth grade Foreign Language in Elementary School (FLES) students who had studied a foreign language since the first grade did better on tests of divergent thinking than the control group who had not studied a foreign language. In 1986, Rafferty “reported that in a study of 13,000 third, fourth , and fifth grade Louisiana students, those who had studied a foreign language significantly outperformed students who had received extra English language arts instructions instead of the foreign language” (Donato, R. & Terry, R.M., 1995, p. 5). Another study by Foster and Reeves, performed in 1989, found that the FLES students in the sixth grade also did better in metacognitive processing and in analysis,

synthesis, and evaluation, than those students who spoke only English. In 1991, Bamford's study was released which stated that second grade students in foreign language immersion programs had demonstrated significant growth in nonverbal problem-solving ability as well. Studies that have been done of FLES and immersion programs report that students do better in academics, especially in language arts when they study a foreign language (Donato, R. & Terry, R.M., 1995, p. 5).

In an article titled: Foreign Language Study in Elementary Schools: Benefits and Implications for Achievement in Reading and Math, the author investigates how to improve students' achievement in reading and math. The article explores the idea that introducing and increasing students' study of foreign languages in elementary schools can bring up their scores. The successful programs that have increased test scores include: immersion programs, FLES, and FLEX programs (Stewart, J., 2005, p. 1). Even the No Child Left Behind Act, which was created to help children attain proficiency in reading and math, has recognized foreign languages as a core subject. Former U.S. Secretary of Education Roderick Paige acknowledges that "foreign language learning improves a student's cognitive and academic performance" and "goes hand in glove with the No Child Left Behind goals of ensuring high student outcomes for all children." "At a magnet school in Charlotte, North Carolina, students are immersed in French, German, or Japanese in kindergarten and do not study English vocabulary, grammar, or spelling until third grade (Stewart, J., 2005, p. 5). In 2001, 94% of the third graders and 100% of the fifth graders in that immersion school scored at or above grade level in reading in English." (Stewart, J., 2005, p. 4). "Given the evidence, foreign language study in combination with a strong core curriculum in the

elementary school may be the key to improved achievement in reading and math as well as to preparing our children to be successful participants in the global community.”

(Stewart, J., 2005, p. 5).

## **Latino Population**

In the United States, many students are entering into the public school system with the ability to speak Spanish. Therefore schools across the countries are creating different kinds of bilingual programs. While these programs can sometimes greatly benefit both English and Spanish speakers, some programs encourage Spanish speaking students to forget their first language in order to learn their second (Casanova, U. & Arias, B., 1993, p. 4). Samuel Betances speaks about his experiences with language instruction in a typical public school in the United States. He was a Mexican immigrant who spoke no English upon entering the United States, and of his experiences he says:

“My teachers thought they knew exactly what they needed to do in order to prepare me for the future, so the first thing they told me was: ‘Learn English.’ So I said, ‘Si, si.’ Then in the same vein they came up with, ‘Forget Spanish.’ And interestingly enough, before I learned English I forgot Spanish, and soon I was illiterate in two languages.” (Casanova, U. & Arias, B., 1993, p. 4).

This brings about a highly controversial issue in the United States about how to educate immigrants, or children born in the United States, who are unable to speak English. There are a lack of qualified teachers who speak Spanish and English and so many programs are letting these children fall through the cracks. Education should expand a child’s horizons, not contract them, and there are many programs for English Language Learners (ELLs) that are causing them to miss out on the benefits of growing up bilingual. If students who can already speak Spanish are given a chance to learn both Spanish and English then they could reap the benefits that come from being bilingual.



However, they must be instructed so that they can become bilingual, biliterate and bicultural.

There is a lack of foreign language education in the United States; however, middle and upper class parents often value bilingualism. It seems to be an opportunity that people with the money to pay for the schools with the programs or the extra classes can use this to their advantage. Middle and upper class parents can see the personal, academic, social, and economic advantages. The fact is that many people of low socioeconomic status have an even greater opportunity to speak two languages. Many immigrants come into the United States with the ability to speak a language foreign and they are forced to learn English and forget their first language. It should be looked at as an advantage to be able to speak two languages. Why is it a privilege for some people to speak two languages, but the idea of minorities being able to speak two languages is frowned upon? (Casanova, U. & Arias, B., 1993, p. 2). “Why do we promote bilingualism where it’s artificial and least likely to succeed and discourage it where it’s most natural and likely to be reinforced?” (Casanova, U. & Arias, B., 1993, p. 3).

Bilingual children were found to perform significantly better than monolingual children in both verbal and non verbal tests of mental ability when variables in gender, age, and socioeconomic status were controlled (Casanova, U. & Arias, B., 1993, p. 21). They explain that bilinguals are doing better because of code-switching, objectification and verbal mediation (Casanova, U. & Arias, B., 1993, p. 22). However, as it stands, the schooling profile of linguistic minority children—particularly Latino students—displays disproportionately high rates of dropping out, low academic achievement, and high enrollment in low academic tracks (Casanova, U. & Arias, B., 1993, p. 4). Forty years

ago only 75% of Mexican American students were in school and now that more and more Mexican American students are entering into schools across the nation there has to be a way to support them.

“Unequivocally, more students from diverse ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds are flowing into classrooms all across the United States.” (Boyd, F.B. & Brock, C.H., 2004, p. 1). Between 1980 and 1990 legal immigration was almost 9 million which was the same as immigration from 1900 to 1910. In 1994 there were 9.9 million language minority students in the United States. Sadly enough the number of students with limited English proficiency who are having academic difficulties is increasing. From 1986 to 1992 the number of these students increased from 1 to 2.5 million. “Between 1970 and 2000, the number of children K-12 who speak Spanish at home doubled from 3.5 to 7 million, while the number of children speaking Asian languages tripled from 0.5 to 1.5 million.” (Fix, Michael, 2005). There are many problems that come with having so many students in schools that are unable to speak proficient English, mostly because of a lack of teachers and funds. “In fact approximately 90% of the U.S. teaching force comprises of European American teachers, primarily women from working- and middle-class backgrounds, who speak only English.” (Boyd, F.B. & Brock, C.H., 2004, p. 2).

In order to provide more support for Latino students in the United States there have been several different types of programs developed. One program was developed from 1970-71 by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory. It was a program for three, four, and five year old Mexican-American children and funded by grants for the U.S. Office of Economic Opportunity and the U.S. Office of Child Development in

McAllen, Texas (Fallon, B.J., 1973, p. 72). Test finding found that the children met the criteria on the curriculum-referenced tests on all but a few of the twenty five units. The children in the program did better on tests of Spanish and English comprehension, general concepts, and non-verbal intelligence (Fallon, B.J., 1973, p. 74).

There are several different kinds of programs that are implemented across the United States in elementary schools. There are immersion programs where two languages are taught to a group of students who have two different first languages. There are also programs where students are pulled out for English or Spanish instruction. Various programs have been developed but research by Collier and Collier (2003) shows that dual-language programs provide the further advantage of helping to close the achievement gap between English speakers and English learners in the United States (Stewart, J., 2005, p. 3).

“Today’s America is, and will continue to be, characterized by ethnic and linguistic diversity. Citizens experience this diversity every day in our shopping malls, our schools, and in our workplaces. According to the 2003 Census, Hispanics now comprise 13.7 percent of the U.S. population, up from 10.3 percent a decade ago.” (Education for Global Leadership, 2006, p. 19). There are so many states, like North Carolina that are having a giant increase in their Latino population. In North Carolina the Latino population had the highest percentage growth of any state in the nation. During the 2003-2004 school year, almost 71,000 North Carolina elementary and secondary students were English language learners. The Bureau is predicting that from 2050, non Hispanic whites will constitute only one-half of the U.S. population (Education for Global Leadership, 2006, p. 19).

No one can debate the increase of Latinos in the United States and the effect that it is having on the United States public school system (Education for Global Leadership, 2006, p. 19). “A recent Roper poll found that nearly half—48 percent—of Americans have at least weekly dealings with someone whose first language is not English. English is, and will continue to be, the primary language of the United States. But one survey found that, although 75 percent of Americans believe that English should be our official language, the same percentage thought that all students should know a second language.” (Education for Global Leadership, 2006, p. 20).

There are so many studies and so much proof that elementary school students really need access to foreign language classes. Across Europe students are growing up learning two languages from a young age and it really benefits them later in life. There are multiple reasons why students need to learn more about foreign languages. It gives them more of a cultural awareness, when they are younger and their minds are more open to learning foreign languages, and it has only been shown to increase their cognitive abilities.

In the future it can only benefit students who have had practice in multiple languages. There is a great increase of Latinos in the United States and being able to speak Spanish can really help people who are seeking employment. Not only are companies looking for bilingual individuals, but people who know are knowledgeable other cultures and beliefs so as to improve the economic and business relations with other countries.

Foreign language education also benefits the United States politically. The United States is one of very few influential countries that have so few bilingual citizens.

Not only is there a lack of government translators, but Americans general lack of knowledge about the world will only cause future difficulties. It would greatly help the government and the country if more students were graduating with a basic knowledge of a foreign language.

Overall, the reasons why elementary school students should be able to learn foreign languages far outweigh the negative aspects of installing foreign language classes into classrooms across the United States. If subjects like reading, writing, and arithmetic are deemed to be so important for elementary school students, how is it decided that learning a foreign language is not just as important?

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